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THE MYSTICAL AND THE MODERN: THE USES OF ORDINARY WRITINGS  
IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY ICELANDIC SPIRITUAL MEDIUMS

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One of the essential characteristics of modernity, particularly in the part of the world we call the West, is the appearance of a process of individuation which necessitates the ‘invention of the self’.<sup>1</sup> The idea that modern society instils in the individual a compelling need to be someone original has slowly developed and become accepted to the point of being a truism; it remains the foundation stone for historical and sociological theory. This social process of identity formation proceeds through a series of narratives. To narrate oneself – to construct one’s own identity by telling a story – constitutes a great historical change. Many existing studies on this theme demonstrate the kind of self-narrating process which Paul Ricoeur calls a ‘dynamic identity’, allowing the subject to both change and remain the same. In this way, the work of the narrative reconciles ‘the very concepts which Locke held to be opposites of each other: identity and diversity’.<sup>2</sup> In his important work on modern identity formation, Charles Taylor adopted a different vocabulary to express this same notion of dynamic identity, by revealing its religious and mystical roots.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he showed how Western Christendom gradually confirmed what he called ‘the myth of the innate individual’. According to this concept, individual identity derives from a deeper nature, from hidden resources buried within the ‘true self’, which has existed from the beginning, resembles no other self, and must be respected. In searching for the historical conditions from which modern iden-

- 1 Jean-Claude Kauffman, *L’invention de soi. Une théorie de l’identité*, Paris (Hachette Pluriel), 2004.
- 2 Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris (Le Seuil), 1990, p. 168.
- 3 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity*, Cambridge MA (HUP), 1989.

tity emerged, Taylor measures the profound temporal dimensions of this mystical concept. But he also accounts for the way in which it has spread in the modern era<sup>4</sup>, as, among other things, he unveils the mystical matrix which gave birth to the idea of individual identity in the Christian West.

In fact, the notion that the individual must create his own 'constructed self', and defend it against other identities imposed from outside, is often held to be the characteristic feature of the modern individuation process. It represents the autonomy and independence claimed by the subject in relation to outside attempts to determine his or her identity. This concept, however, is sometimes enacted through a mystical quest, in which the individual in the process of identity construction comes to discover his own 'true self', and manages to fuse his two 'selves'. In this perspective, the dialectic of the dynamic identity is extremely relevant, and everything is shaped by the mystical conception of the 'true self', which is taken as an ontological reference point, and a unique primary essence to which the 'constructed self' gradually approximates.

In this chapter, I attempt to grasp this mystical dimension of modern identity with the help of some remarkable but very appropriate material – the various writings which accompanied the individual identity formation of Icelandic spiritual mediums, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. At the end of the nineteenth century, Icelandic society became passionately interested in spiritualism which, originating mainly from Great Britain, broke like a wave over the island. As in other Western countries, the arrival of spiritualism brought with it a new category of intercessors – the mediums. Their séances, in which they were possessed by the spirits of the dead, were extremely popular all over Europe and North America. In many societies, spiritualism and its mediums were eventually to lose their appeal and become marginalised. In Iceland, however, they enjoyed a different fate and still have a remarkable role to play today. Present-day Iceland produces a considerable number of these distinctive characters – intercessors between the dead and the living – who have individual identities and collective authority.<sup>5</sup> The mediums differ from other groups particu-

4 A certain mystical idea of the unconscious developed most notably in Carl Jung. See F.X. Charet, *Spiritualism and the Foundations of C. G. Jung's Psychology*, New York (SUNY), 1993; and Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, New York (Basic Books), 1970.

5 The continuing status of the medium in Icelandic society is a topic beyond the scope of this chapter. See Pétur Pétursson, *Church and Social Change: A study*



larly in that their identity has developed through a range of narrative forms, often committed to writing (notebooks, letters, biographies, articles, reports, postcards). A number of such ordinary writings have been compiled and published. Since Icelandic society has continued to nurture such spiritual mediums, we now have at our disposal a substantial body of ordinary writings, which allows us to observe their role in the fabrication of these unusual mystical identities over an entire century.

## The Other narrative genre of spiritualism

Spiritualist literature is vast and extends into various genres, from romantic fiction to the scientific report, the latter being perceived as the most representative. The reports consist of accounts which try to be 'scientific' by relating, down to the smallest detail, experiments carried out privately or during group séances. In each case the author seeks to demonstrate the validity of theoretic discourses on telekinetics, metapsychology or metempsychosis. This literature is particularly fond of deploying learned and academic references. But as spiritualist theories lost their credibility, this literature too was discredited.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, another kind of literature which sprung up gradually as spiritualism abandoned its early scientific and positivist ambitions, and which belongs to a much more intimate genre. It tentatively appeared in Iceland with a second generation of mediums in the 1930s and 1940s. These mediums were no longer merely means of communication with the after-life, and they developed a clear awareness of their own identities. As

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*of the secularization process in Iceland, 1830–1930*, Helsingborg (Lund Studies in Sociology), 1983; William H. Swatos & Loftur Reimar Gissurarsson, *Icelandic Spiritualism: Mediumship and modernity in Iceland*, New Brunswick & London (Transaction), 1997; Christophe Pons, 'Médiums d'Islande: globalisation des biens spirituels et routinisation religieuse', *Journal des Anthropologues*, 98–99, 2004, pp. 55–75; and the same author's 'Le partenariat attentif de la cosmologie islandaise: le rôle des morts dans les événements génomique et spiritualiste', *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 29: 2, 2005, pp. 131–149.

6 Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent & Christine Blondel, eds, *Des savants face à l'occulte 1870–1940*, Paris (La Découverte), 2002.

they devoted less and less time to passive possession, most of them became more independent and started to advertise their healing powers, legitimised by detailed recommendations from grateful clients, stories of what they experienced or heard, and thanks sent by letter or postcard. These diverse texts gradually formed a new corpus which belongs in a much more popular context, often collected and published by a single author. The collection is frequently enriched by the testimony of the mediums themselves, who are invited to comment on the turning-points in their own lives. In this way, the first self-narratives appeared, with the spotlight now focused on the mediums themselves rather than solely on their circles of initiates. The transition was a smooth one, reflecting a persistent trend towards a new kind of interest in mediumship, in which elements of the learned and the popular could not be separated quite as easily as had once been the case.

So although the spiritualist literature dedicated to establishing 'proof' has more or less disappeared from view, the narrative of the self now plays an essential role in mediums' lives. Whether published or not, this is a fairly systematic and inevitable step taken by the mediums, who recount their life history, identify the key events, and put into order their fate, their vocation and the choices they made, in order to create a continuous discourse that says who they are, how and why. From the medium's point of view, this constitutes a twin process of individualisation and classification in a long genealogy of locally certified intercessors. From the readers' point of view, it answers local public demand for such writings and such roles.

The narrative is usually structured in three parts. First comes a presentation by the author, who usually introduces the medium from two important and curiously complementary angles: he first emphasises what is individual and distinctive about the medium as an individual person; and next he inscribes him firmly within his lineage – his kinship group, ancestors and descendants – linking him with a place and region of origin, and even putting him in his historical context. The second part is the biography proper, organised in classically chronological fashion around the various stages of life. This might very often be enlarged by a discussion of spiritualist ideas in which, at a time when symbolic universes are multiplying and becoming more and more personalised, the mediums can explain their own cosmogonies, knowledge, techniques and supernatural associates. Finally, the last part gathers together the many testimonies of a grateful entourage, which gives the medium greater or lesser authority, depending on the density of the social network which is mobilised. Thus, in the formal structure



of these texts, the medium's personal biography is most often the meat in the sandwich, between references to a family group on one side, and a social context which is quite independent from kinship on the other.

## Childhood: Speaking the world

The first real autobiography appeared in 1972. Its author was the very well-known Hafsteinn Björnsson (1915–1977) who published his *Stories from the Collection of Medium Hafsteinn* five years before his death.<sup>7</sup> The text is ordered chronologically, giving his childhood pride of place, followed by a sequence of events which underpins the choice of mediumship as a 'profession'. Hafsteinn tells of his meetings with the supernatural beings who guided him and shaped his identity. Then comes the period of real work, his 'career', with his collection of expressions of thanks from patients, and recognition from the public of both worlds and from society in general. His story reflects a personal approach in which the medium elaborates a discourse about what he has become. He is no longer the seer of former times, who drew his legitimacy from a gift he inherited from his ancestors, but assumes a distinctive identity asserted throughout his life.

Yet, although this narrative model becomes an essay that focuses on the self, it offers surprisingly few details about that self. In the pages concerned with childhood, no sketch is offered of the aetiology of the child's special gift, and the text is often fairly reticent about the social and familial setting in which Hafsteinn grew up. We do not expect an essay in psychoanalysis, but we might have expected a little more about these men and women when, from the vantage-point of a mature age, they decided to reflect on their lives. Instead, the narrative sets forth an Icelandic cosmology with which everyone is familiar because everyone has been a child. There is a basic paradox between on one hand returning to the self and on the other evading too intimate a story. This suggests that the medium's biography obeys quite different criteria from those applying to a search for the Pandora's box in which are hidden all the dark secrets of one's inner self, providing material for multiple readings from either mystical or psychic viewpoints.

7 Hafsteinn Björnsson, *Sögur ur safni Hafsteins miðils*, Reykjavík (Skuggsjá), 1972.

In fact the biographies follow another expressive function, which is to articulate a cosmology which every Icelander knows, precisely because he too is an Icelander. And if the mediums' memoirs tell us nothing that we don't already know, they tell it with the simple enthusiasm of those who see more than others do. Furthermore, from Hafsteinn right up to the mediums of today, this logic of enunciation is relentlessly repeated, in the sense that each new biography seeks to recount this cosmology as though it is a common foundation on which everyone is standing and taking a good look to see how well it has been built.

This cosmology is an essential expression of the indigenous Icelandic countryside. Right up to the present, Icelandic-ness has been firmly rooted in rural life. This is absolutely crucial for the mediums. However, most mediums these days actually live in the capital Reykjavik, and rustic childhoods are becoming rarer, so mediums are instead substituting their memories of summer holidays spent in their ancestral homes. Such nostalgic returns produce accounts like Hafsteinn's. They rekindle a folkloric interest imbued with romanticism, and celebrate a cosmology populated by a varied cast. The first of these personages to be mentioned are usually the non-human beings who occupy intermediary spaces on the borders of the domestic world. These are the hidden people (*huldufólk*), elves (*álfar*) and shining elves (*ljósálfar*), gnomes (*jarðgnomar*), and wicked and harmful dwarves (*dvergar* and *ljúflingar*). Hafsteinn presents them as extraordinary companions that lead parallel existences, who mystify him because they have no first names. 'And what is the little girl in the red dress called, the one with that green cap, or the blond boy who goes bare-headed with a blue sweater?'<sup>8</sup> These early memories date from when Hafsteinn was between three and five years old. According to local conceptions of individual development, at this age the child cannot identify where these beings belong because he cannot yet separate nature from culture. In this respect the child mediums are speaking to every Icelander, because they reiterate conceptions of the animist world common in Nordic folklore. There is certainly a dimension of romantic nationalism to this with which occultism has for a long time been associated.<sup>9</sup>

8 Ibid., p. 13.

9 Christophe Pons, 'Occultisme, protestantisme et plongée inventive en Islande: les tendances iconophiles des contextes aniconiques', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, forthcoming in 2007.

Another important element of this cosmology is the customary presence of the dead, whom the child also confronts. In childhood memories, the dead one encounters are usually connected with a place. They are not seen as malevolent beings, and they too are not identified by name. Hafsteinn is surely referring to one of them when he recalls an old man accompanied by his dog. Before he himself is aware of it, his mother confirms the truth of his vision: 'I cannot remember for how long this old man had been following me, until my mother called and pointed him out to me [...] I realised then because I knew that mama often saw the same things as me.'<sup>10</sup> No doubt this maternal affirmation contributed to the longevity of the connection between Hafsteinn and the old man, who re-appears several times without ever being named. These periodic apparitions spring out in the text, surprising the reader as much as the author. Gradually the true nature of the connection emerges: 'It seemed to me that I was not alone, I knew that a good friend was following me.'<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the form of this curious stranger, Hafsteinn found his first spiritual ally and genuine accomplice: 'My old friend was there, looking at me with his little eyes, smiling and happy for me [...] He did not speak to me but the expression on his face spoke volumes.'<sup>12</sup> Since he is not identified by a first name, the old man cannot strictly be regarded as a traditional ancestor follower. All the same, everything here suggests that he is in fact just such an agent, that is to say, a benevolent guardian ancestor reminiscent of the female follower (*fylgja*) whom everyone inherits according to established custom.

This cosmological scenario also unfolds in a Christian perspective. For Hafsteinn, this takes the form of an old woman named Aðalbjörg, who lives on a neighbouring farm and speaks to him of God the creator, who is good and is the essence of all things. She reads him poetry about Jesus and introduces him to prayers and hymns. Finally, she tells him of Pastor Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674), an important figure in Icelandic Protestantism famous for writing psalms and hymns. But since the young Hafsteinn doesn't grasp the importance of this remote person, she then proposes:

10 Hafsteinn Björnsson, *Sögur*, p. 37.

11 Ibid., p. 66.

12 Ibid., p. 69.



Listen, it would be much better if I let you come with me to Church, the next time Hallgrímur is taking the service. Oh yes. He is quite old now, bless him, and even though he is a pastor, he hasn't always enjoyed himself in life.<sup>13</sup>

Remote universes are intersecting here as we find that Hallgrímur returns to this world to be among the living. The young Hafsteinn has the great honour of meeting him. He describes him as the great man of Glaumbæ, escorted by angels who disappear as soon as ill-intentioned humans approach. Then comes the moment when Hafsteinn goes to communion with the old woman. He again sees the great man of Glaumbæ and, as always happens when the narrator is Hafsteinn as a child, the scene acquires a profoundly supernatural dimension:

Why is pastor Hallgrímur dressed like that? Surely Aðalbjörg will know why, I thought. I will ask her this evening, when we are back at the house. I cannot talk to her now because people are singing. Aðalbjörg took the book, opened it and sung along with them. But what happened next? Why this white misty cloud spreading through the whole Church? Why did I see a face in this misty cloud? Who was that man standing next to the great man of Glaumbæ? He was dressed all in white, and walked in front of the Church and in front of the people. I could not understand it.<sup>14</sup>

Hafsteinn's childhood fully illustrates the ambivalence of medium narratives. On one hand, the subject centres the story on himself, but on the other he offers no interpretative or intimate commentary. As a result, instead of the story functioning as the preliminary stage of identity formation, it rather functions as a pretext for sketching out a cosmological fresco in which various beings co-habit freely and without respect for any hierarchy. Whether he sees an elf, an angel, a dead person or God, the child reports his visions in a monotone of naïve innocence. Generally speaking, we find in all childhood medium narratives, including the most recent ones, evidence of the same social pressure to enunciate a cultural cosmogony. In this sense, the narrative sequence signifies a certain cultural determinism.

But the life stories are not just limited to childhood, and the story that follows, concentrating on the alliances which will link the medium to supernatural entities, throws quite a different light on the subject's work of

13 Ibid., p. 25.

14 Ibid., p. 31.

establishing his individual autonomy. This time, the individual breaks free of cultural determinism by inventing new models. Hafsteinn is exceptional in this respect, and his case can be situated on the border between two literary genres and two kinds of medium identities. Unlike many of his contemporaries (which is odd in itself), he says nothing about his supernatural associates, and we rely on other writers to give us a few clues. These are to be found in the writings and testimonies of various other mediums and clients, as well as in the more scientific literature, produced by authors who are close to the official psychic activities of the spiritualist societies. Both types of literature agree on the fact that a Runólfur Runólfsson, *alias* Runki, was Hafsteinn's mentor. But while writers in the first group (mediums and clients) portray Runki as Hafsteinn's personal associate, the second group (scientific writers) attaches more importance to what he has to say independently of his relationship with the medium. As for Hafsteinn's own text, after the childhood sequence, the story is cut short and moves directly to the third section – testimonials and thanks from friends, acquaintances and occasional clients. Once again, in this third section, which represents yet another form of ordinary writing, we see a form of social determinism at work. This testimonial literature draws all its power from the extent of the social networks mobilised. In many respects it is a literary form that incorporates and perpetuates the *Þjóðsögur* – that is, the histories of the people or of popular sayings compiled in great number by Icelandic folklorists at the end of the nineteenth century. These accounts are always very precise about names of people and places, and are narratives of events; they recount incidents in a descriptive mode which allows little room for interpretation. They have been identified as oral literature, put into writing as part of the vast folklore-collecting enterprise that took place in the nineteenth century. The same matrix resurfaces in the collections which form the third section of medium biographies. This is a literature *of the people* addressed *to the people*, but not in any pejorative sense; it refers to the Icelandic word *Þjóð* meaning nation.

When Hafsteinn shapes his tale into two very culturally and socially determined forms, he is thus (probably quite unconsciously) constructing a new medium identity. He lies halfway between the customary seer of former times, who drew his legitimacy from a gift he held from his ancestors, and the distinctive identity of the modern intercessor. The big difference is that the traditional seer inherited his powers from his lineage, according to the position he was assigned within the kinship group, while the modern interces-

sor affirms his own identity in relation to associations outside his ancestry-group which liberate him from his family connections. The ethnographical and archival evidence available on the first kind of medium depicts individuals who do not tell their stories but whose stories are told by their group. Of course, we must always be aware of the fragmentary nature of historical evidence, but nevertheless we need to recognise that no seer constructed his identity in a self-narrative before the twentieth century. A significant historical change occurred when this self-centred discourse emerged, creating a rupture with past models as it distanced itself from kinship affiliations. The modern medium no longer wishes to be the descendant of a grandfather who inherited in his turn from his forefather, and so on back to the dimly-remembered family past. All the same, in spite of this process, some kinship connections do persist. For one thing, the customers sometimes demand it, seeing it as a guarantee of quality. Today's mediums like to tell you that, even if it's not a crucial factor, there has always been a special gift running through their family.

### The Age of Alliances: The act of individuation

Not only is there no lack of testimony about contact with supernatural beings, but this very quickly appears to be one component of the medium's individual identity. In most cases, the medium relies on various supernatural beings to establish his personal identity: he encounters them within a very personalised cosmogony, and without them he would find it difficult to consider himself an intercessor. Here the narrative process plays an essential role in developing these interlocking identities.

The story of the well-known Margrét Jónsdóttir Thorlacius de Öxnafeili (1908–89) has been told at length, most notably in a two-volume compilation entitled *The Female Seer*.<sup>15</sup> This work forms about 500 pages of stories of her life, visions and healing work, as well as numerous testimonies from grateful patients. Following the custom, her story opens with her rural childhood and goes on to elaborate a cosmogony richly populated by nameless non-humans. Although these descriptions of the *huldufólk* dominate

15 Eiríkur Sigurðsson, *Skyggna konan I & II*, Reykjavík (Sálarrannsóknafélag Íslands, 1960 & Bókaútgáfan Fróði, 1963).



the account, nothing is forgotten. We still meet the usual dead spirits, and we observe the social role assumed by the local intercessor, exercised through her prophetic ability to read the thoughts of others in coffee cups or to 'see' places where lost sheep have strayed. The Christian dimension is well represented in the roles of the Church, prayers, and the presence of Jesus and God, and even a guardian angel known as 'the shepherd'. Margrét's history, however, enters quite new territory when she meets Friðrik, who appears perched at the top of a cliff surrounded by *huldufólk*. She looks at him and asks him if he's a hidden man (*huldumaður*), to which he replies that 'you could call him that [...] But now I know that Friðrik is human, a dead man and not a hidden man. He is a man of charity who helps people and heals their sickness'.<sup>16</sup>

For some time, therefore, Margrét confused Friðrik with a *huldumaður* and her story raised difficult questions about the possibility of a human having intercourse with a non-human. Experts in spiritualism have studied this possibility but in the end rejected it.<sup>17</sup> And yet the real identity of Friðrik remains a matter of controversy. Although he was considered human, Margrét admitted she never knew what he did in his earthly life, except for the fact that he was a doctor. Meanwhile, another medium and friend of Margrét, Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir (1900–68) from Vestmannaeyar in the southern isles, also claimed to have had a similar relationship with a being who was also called Friðrik. In this case, too, the story had reverberations throughout the country. Without denying Guðrún's relationship with someone called Friðrik, Margrét vehemently defended her own relationship and maintained that the two men were different. In an attempt to get at the truth, the spiritualist experts examined the testimony of both women, and came to the morally safe verdict that the two Friðriks were indeed different men, because one had a beard and the other was clean shaven.<sup>18</sup> There was no argument, therefore, about what might have been a non-human liaison on one hand, or a form of spiritual polygamy on the other. But the anecdotes confirmed the conjugal nature of the relationship. It is clear that Friðrik and Margrét were lovers, both in the ordinary everyday sense and in an idyllic

16 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 34.

17 Einar Kvaran, 'Skygna stúlkan í Öxnafeili', *Morgunn*, 1924, 5, pp. 188–197 at p. 189.

18 Einar Kvaran, 'Margrét Thorlacius í Öxnafeili', *Morgunn*, 1926, 7, pp. 185–213 at p. 188.

romanticised one. Margrét freely reported their happy nocturnal escapades when she left her body to fly off with him to marvellous distant lands, which she told of in the shamanic mode of a journey of the soul:

Thus came Friðrik with me into the sky to new and unknown worlds. That happened sometimes at night, after I had gone to bed or when I went out walking to admire the splendour of the stars. With Friðrik I climbed right to the highest heavens, and he told me that he was going to fly with me to other stars. These journeys gave me much joy.<sup>19</sup>

Margrét is not alone in telling stories like this. There is no shortage of examples, and others have spoken of wonderful experiences they enjoyed with their companions. Very often, mediums did not restrict themselves to one kind of relationship but had two or three at once. In the first part of *The World of the Dead*<sup>20</sup> we find the travel narrative of the medium Björg Sigrún Ólafsdóttir (1909–), in which she reveals her privileged relationships with spirits. She first details a very intimate relationship with a certain Pétur, with a full account of their nocturnal escapades. On a more mundane level, we are told that the mystical couple share their daily life with two other spirits: Björg's mother (who introduced Pétur to her daughter after her own death) and a very young child called Nonni. The medium tells us very little about Nonni, except that he is five or six and that according to Pétur he died during the last century. Björg therefore had ordinary and conscious relationships with this triad. She sees them and talks to them; often they all appear, and they seem to live together quite harmoniously.

They lead a spiritual existence, lived quite consciously outside the context of ritual séances. Moreover, the three personages do not systematically intervene in the séances, with the exception of Pétur who has a special role to play. But Björg also mentions other familiar spirits which only appear on the scene during séances, notably her father Ólafur, Professor Einar Lóftsson (1890–1953), a nineteenth-century ophthalmologist, and a strange Egyptian known as 'The Great Man'. In addition, in many cases the amorous dimension of the relationship is never in doubt, although it is not invariably present. In the case of male mediums, the association with a spiritual partner is rather an invisible companionship, a deep lifelong friendship, remi-

19 Sigurðsson, *Skyggna konan*, vol. 1, p. 46.

20 Guðmundur Kristinsson, *Heimur Framliðinna*, Selfoss (Árnesútgáfan), 1983.

niscent of what Peter Brown tells us about the cult of the saints in the fourth century.<sup>21</sup> Guðmundur Jörundsson (1913–) is a typical example. Although he was not officially a medium, he described his relationship with a young spirit whom he met when he was 17 years old, and with whom he stayed in contact throughout his life. In his self-portrait *Visions and Voyages of the Soul*<sup>22</sup>, he describes this friendship with his ‘dream man’. Their adventures took place mainly at sea, on board the trawler which Guðmundur captained. The ‘dream man’, so-called because he came to fetch Guðmundur in his dreams, took him through the air to distant places, and showed him where to find the best areas to fish. He played the role of an attentive watchman, protecting the continuity of all that Guðmundur had inherited from his family – his boat and his profession. This example is also interesting because it reminds us that mediums do not monopolise associations with spirits. A great number of individuals can be involved without being intercessors, and they can claim such an intimate liaison with a being who may be a female follower (the famous *fylgja*, already glimpsed in Hafsteinn’s story) or, and this would be much more common these days, with that other being called Jesus.

### Inventing the ‘selves’

The mediums therefore use a narrative process to develop supernatural partnerships within a cosmogony which is both culturally determined and individually reworked. In this process of ‘constructing the self’, the medium meets beings whom we can consider *a priori* as other identities, assimilated by the medium into the work of elaborating his or her own individual identity as an intercessor. As the mediums themselves tell us, this identity as an intercessor represents for them their ‘true self’, to which they passionately would like to return. However, in many cases and especially the most recent ones, it becomes difficult to distinguish clearly between the identity of the medium and the identities of the beings with whom he or she

21 Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its rise and function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago (Chicago UP), 1981.

22 Guðmundur Jörundsson, *Sýnir og sálfarir*, Reykjavík (Skuggsjá), 1982.



associates. Often the characters are blurred and the identity of one is intermingled with or even superimposed upon the identity of the other. Eventually, they make up a sort of kaleidoscope which displays many different facets appropriated by the medium as many versions of himself.

As the discourse develops, there is an increasing tendency to multiply the number of beings, agents, protectors and partners connected to the medium. Although the special status of the first chosen relationship is maintained, the cumulative process produces more auxiliary spirits, all exclusive to the medium and jealously guarded as his own. As we have seen, this was the case with Björg. These new auxiliary spirits, however, may exhibit unusual characteristics. For one thing, they are more and more frequently foreign to Iceland, and thus confirm in a way the primacy of such partnerships over kinship. Take for instance Ólafur H. T. (1960–), a numerological medium, who had spiritual partnerships with a North American medicine-man who lived in 1478, a medieval French monk, and an Icelandic doctor. Most living mediums claim similar triads, the most common characters being North American or Inuit shamans, Tibetan monks, Catholic nuns or the Orthodox Patriarch. These new beings are increasingly represented in forms which have some resemblance to the medium. In fact, they regularly appear as intercessors themselves or as religious specialists whose individual identities resonate with that of the medium. Furthermore, the medium often tries to identify points of similarity with them – in their common tastes, shared destinies or any other point of convergence. From another angle, we can observe the tendency to draw or paint their physical portraits after first encountering them in the world of dreams. Generally these portraits are not the work of the medium himself, but rather of clients or other mediums. In every case, common physical features emerge.

Along with this parade of supernatural identities who serve to distinguish the individual ego, we must also include the medium's previous lives, which are an important illustration of the process of becoming an autonomous individual. The medium generally has a collection of them, gathering together the clues to all his previous existences as they come to him in dreams, visions and experiences. In the short history of medium biography, this accumulation of past lives is a recent phenomenon, although it was already present in oral discourse before making its tentative way into written texts. The principle remains that of an individual identity that owes nothing to anyone, and liberates the ego from its links with lineage, ancestors and ethnic roots. In rediscovering the traces of his former lives lived in

different places, periods and ethnic contexts, the subject is not merely stepping outside time, but is also inscribing his gift – and his own identity – within a new network composed of multiple versions of himself, removed in space and time. In referring to these former incarnations, the ego refers only to himself. In multiplying his own identities, he creates a personal, independent network, which is no longer embedded in connections with the land or with his own ancestral family.

The following extract from Bíbí Ólafsdóttir's biography (1954–) shows how the medium uses these memories to imagine new kin relationships and networks. In this way new connections are invented for the self or, in other words, a variety of selves is invented, in representations of the subject unconstrained by space and time.

I was working as a nurse in a very big old hospital near Paris. I remember that place very well. I remember the colour of the building inside and outside. There were a lot of wounded soldiers there. I was 27 when I had a riding accident [...] After the accident the last thing I saw was that I was lying on a stretcher at the hospital entrance. A woman I was working with was crying. She tried to speak to me but I died. I know this person today.

I cannot stand to go near horses.

I also had another life in which I was burned as a witch in Russia [...] But I hadn't done anything. There was a man standing in front of the fire and he was married to my half-sister [...] I have met this man too, who was standing by the fire in that life. I have had two living children with him and two dead ones. He was my husband for 18 years.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In the course of this journey into the ordinary writings of Icelandic mediums, I have tried to show that instead of stripping the process of mystical identity formation of all its illusions, modernity actually reinforces its imaginative mechanisms, especially through the narrative of the self. There is in fact a kind of progression from the first example of Hafsteinn, who hardly developed his own individuation at all, to the later cases of supernatural

23 Svava Jónsdóttir, *Hjálp að handan*, Reykjavík (Bókaútgáfan Skjaldborg), 2002, p. 39.

associations accompanying the growing autonomy of individual identities and spiritual cosmogonies.

This unusual corpus, with all its mystical dimensions, also calls into question the concept of dynamic identity. The question we have to ask is: how can a process of individuation, with all that it implies in terms of the uniqueness and distinctive character of the subject, be compatible with relationships with the supernatural? We are unable to provide a clear answer to this question, but have attempted at least to outline its main features. We have noted that, for the individual, the challenge of modernity seems to lie in finding a balance between the different notions of the 'true self' and the 'constructed self'. Today's mediums are no longer just living people who happen to meet spirits; now they also discover spirits within themselves, in a stunningly reworked version of the 'true self'. Of course, we have to remember that we are analysing a very untypical situation: the discussion of narrative forms of individuation and individual identity formation do not normally rely on material wholly inscribed within mystical and spiritual contexts. Nevertheless, at a historical moment when supernatural partnerships are thriving and when a large number of people base their identities on a relationship with a supernatural being, the journey to Iceland is more than a curious anecdote, and throws new light on the question of the modern self. We are far from Descartes' certitude about the existence of the 'I': the inherent contradictions of the modern self have once more swallowed up a whole universe of cosmogonies, spirits who choose their protégés, auxiliary partners and previous lives.







